

“Topographies of Soul: Altars on the Threshold of Wilderness”

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Then the Lord will create over the whole site of Mount Zion and over its places of assembly a cloud by day and smoke and the shining of a flaming fire by night. Indeed over all the glory there will be a canopy. It will serve as a pavilion, a shade by day from the heat, and a refuge and a shelter from the storm and rain (Isa. 4.5-7).

There are places in this world that are neither here nor there, neither up nor down, neither real nor imaginary. These are the in-between places, difficult to find and even more challenging to sustain. Yet they are the most fruitful places of all. For in these liminal narrows a kind of life takes place that is out of the ordinary, creative and once in a while genuinely magical (Thomas Moore, “Neither Here Nor There”).

Wilderness is a state and a place where aloneness reigns, where familiar and community ties have been severed, where easy footholds have crumbled, where seemingly safe harbors have been storm-tossed or invaded, and where carefully tended emotions have erupted. It is primordial, mythic, biblical, and part of life. It is an ever-changing, ever-self-redefining territory cracked open to soul. Threshold is a state and a place alongside wilderness. More than a scenic viewpoint, which provides merely a panorama and a point of reference or remembrance, the threshold is like a river or path. Cutting through or straddling the wilderness chasm, it provides both vistas and a channel, a range of places to gather impressions about the wilderness and a depth of space in which to gather them. Just as wilderness is to be experienced and honored, threshold is to be traversed and sampled.

Markers of thresholds abound in sacred and secular texts, in mythical, historical and certainly our own time. Makers of threshold markers also abound. Prophets, mystics, and scholars have constructed and reconstructed them in words. Using the landscape as metaphor, and my collages, assemblages, and shrines as samples, I build altars. They honor wilderness in various ways and are all altars to nature. As territorial markers, made in response to and within the limits of a spiritual site (not to mention the physical site of the actual altar installation), they incorporate both vistas and samples, actual landscapes and material accretions. Activating the senses of sight and touch, they map the liminal state of wilderness three dimensionally; that is, topographically. Since they mark only one stage, state, and interpretation of wilderness, these nature altars are provisional. Provisionality, however, is balanced with the very real “stuff” out of which their components are made—pebbles, rocks, crushed minerals, shells, dried plant material, sand, rock salt, spices, beads, sequins, glitter, paint, gel mediums, and even nail polish. This stuff is mounted up layer upon layer on top of cut and collaged photographs, themselves mounted in or glued on boxes, drawers, tea cans, other “found” containers, and heavy, handmade paper. Made out of the vernacular residue of experience and vernacular materials collected from the closet, pantry, and craft shop, these components occupy the most ephemeral regions of

installation art. Framing and supporting them, ever so gently, in a symmetrical, tabletop construction, with other components to the side, in front, and even at its base on the floor, the altars are even more ephemeral. Any installation carries within it the threat of its own destruction. But perhaps it is that very liminality that pries it open to soul.

Where are the threshold channels and paths that these altars occupy? What is the wilderness that they mine and survey? What is the itinerary of the spiritual journey that they mark? By means of an as yet rough-cut trail I am following in the fields of art and spirituality, conjoined with a branch of feminist art theory, in the following paragraphs I hope to provide a key to the altars and to their territories. I also hope to provide a key to a life made more meaningful, more dimensional, through liminal (wilderness) experience. Though this essay is based on spatial and material metaphors, it is a record of multiple experiences, the all-too-brief, special times excavated out of the rush of everyday life. Thus a temporal dimension is figured as well. As it is a work in progress, this is not so much an essay or “paper” as an extended caption. To continue the geographical analogies with which I began, it is a “key” to a map whose outlines are still being filled in and colored, and whose compass has not yet been determined. Its open-endedness is what, for me, makes it something to write about.

Poised on the Threshold of Wilderness

As perilous as wilderness territory may appear, it is an essential place of reference for a spiritual itinerary, to be visited again and again, to be thoroughly explored and, if at all possible, to be rendered visible. According to Robert Wuthnow, author of *Creative Spirituality: The Way of the Artist*, an apt metaphor is the drift of a river or stream. Proceeding in one’s own willy-nilly way and moving counter to the current, by following the drift one can get caught up in a vicious circle. But then again, if one is careful, the detours of drift make for a deepened, if chastened, life journey. In his commentaries on the Book of Samuel, Eugene Peterson writes that the wilderness in David’s world references another metaphor, “a place of beauty. There are things to be seen, heard, and experienced in this wilderness that can be seen, heard, and experienced nowhere else. . . . we’re plunged, if we let ourselves be, into an awareness of the great mystery of God and the extraordinary preciousness of life.” Furthermore, in the wilderness we grow into deeper understanding of ourselves and our sense of place in a world of constant and unpredictable change. This is because “there’s an organic interconnectedness in the comprehensive totality of creation, visible and invisible, ‘heavens and earth,’ by means of which everything seen and heard, tasted, touched and experienced, if only followed far enough and deep enough, brings us into the presence of God” (74, 207).

Peterson ends that last passage with a geological wrap: “Even rocks.” David’s more intense experiences and harrowing escapes occurred in mountainous regions, and Jesus’s forty days

in the wilderness were similarly craggy. The geological exegesis is more than apt. Rocks and rock formations reference stumbling blocks as well as the granitic greatness of God. Not only that, but their very structure gives rise, in microcosm, to the mountain building and erosion through which our world has been formed, and to the ancient seas and river beds through which our paths cut new swaths. Joseph Bruchac has called them “thresholds of power.” “In such [mountainous places] you may feel you are at the center of all things. . . . Yet there is also a danger. . . . When we pass through, we may be totally changed, We may even create a whole new world. . . .”(7).

In his seminal book *Care of the Soul*, Thomas Moore advises us that soul territories need to be entered, traversed, and lived to the extent that we identify ourselves with them. In order to emerge cleansed and healed, we need to cover ourselves with their dusky soil and steep ourselves in their murky waters. Making art along the soul journey is a way of journaling, traveloguing, and mapping it. It is spiritual practice of a high order. In her equally seminal book *Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory*, Lucy Lippard recapitulates the personal and mythic dimensions of this quest. “Implicit in the work. . . is the notion of the journey—sacred or profane. The restless artist’s preoccupation with travel, navigation, and mapping is often an attempt to address and reconcile the mythic relationship between the daily round and the road to spiritual achievement” (121). Landscape architect Anne Whiston Spirn finds a mythic and literary dimension akin to soul in the very experience of landscape, which can be deepened and broadened through art and design. “Worship, memory, play, movement. . . are pervasive landscape genres. To be fully felt and known landscape literature must be experienced in situ; words, drawings, paintings, or photographs cannot replace the experience of the place itself, though they may enhance and intensify it” (21).

Peterson writes that wilderness is circumstantial and geographical (74). So is threshold. Circumstantially, my wilderness erupted in 1997-99, a two-year period of intense volunteerism, followed by professionalism in the fields of youth ministry, lay leadership, and Christian education. Art education and artmaking were key to these ministries, but all ended abruptly or disastrously in the murky waters and swamplands of interpersonal dynamics. My circumstantial wilderness re-erupted thereafter in my abrupt realization that the “career” I had thought to be cultivating as a teacher of art history would not immediately bear the institutional fruit I had been led to expect. To continue the analogy, the label on the seed pack read “success as defined by the artworld” and what came up appeared initially to be a total bust—a weed or mold that persisted, but didn’t fit that definition. Geographically and concurrently—and continuing to the present—wilderness has been made manifest in the lush, green vistas I have overlooked in Kauai, Hawaii, in the colorful flowers, shrubs and herbs I have watched and tended in Rocky River, Ohio, in the ripened clusters of harvest trees and water plants I photographed at the Katherine Albertson garden in Boise, Idaho, in the arid, broken glass-littered slopes of Boise’s Table Rock, in the early-

spring mossy karst topographies of Mammoth Cave, in the magisterial outcroppings of gneiss, phyllite, and sandstone formations in Great Smoky Mountains National Park, in the valley of the Cuyahoga River and its tributaries in glacier-cut northern Ohio, and in the photographs and other “residues” I have gathered and re-assembled from all of these soulful places.

As I have found through my own experience, revived in the writings and experiences of others, wilderness is a state of being and a state of becoming, different for each person who undertakes to explore, understand and recreate it. “The common element,” Wuthnow writes, “is that something powerful emerges—an experience or insight that defies ready interpretation” (40). For me, something incredibly powerful has emerged. One might liken it to orogeny—the process of mountain building. Or to buried and compressed rock layers shifting, moving, and emerging miles from their point of origin to become the cornerstones of new life, new cultures. “The shift from trying to explain all phenomena to giving an honored place to mystery is the primary characteristic of a postmodern return to soul,” Moore writes (“Soul’s Religion” 22). As I move—either spiritually, symbolically or physically, from one state of becoming to the next, I redefine myself as an artist, shifting achievement from “success” (a term fraught with deceit and falsehood) to making a personal impact and lasting interpersonal connections as a communicator, facilitator, and teacher.

Digging into the Terrain; Enshrining It as Holy; Giving Sanctuary

Since 1999, I have been making shrines, sanctuaries, and landscapes. In 1979, I concluded my first series of landscapes. Most of the latter are drawings—landscape impressions—although they tend to be multimedia in execution (pastel, charcoal, pencil, watercolor, acrylic—with iridescent glazes and glitter in the more recent work). The former, by far the majority, are assemblages. They are real objects, recapturing and reinventing real soulful experiences and, in the process, making something both personal and archetypal that I do not hesitate to call sacred.

The assemblages—shrines and sanctuaries of diminutive size—enshrine and vivify a thought, a meditation, or a plethora of meditations. They also unearth and partially unpack a time and space capsule of personal crisis. These reflective processes are reinforced through the image-saturated books of the Old Testament (Genesis, Psalms, Song of Solomon, Isaiah, Wisdom of Solomon) which I first explored in my Christian education positions and now re-open, enriching the bittersweet memories with new associations. They are also reinforced through my ongoing studies of spirituality—in my Christian, protestant tradition, in the Ignatian/Jesuit exercise tradition, in Catholic images and “Mary Gardens,” in archaic and goddess-saturated cultures and, most importantly, in western art history. My scholarly pursuits are in modern and contemporary art history with a focus on photography and corporate structures, yet I am powerfully drawn to ancient and medieval art and

architecture, to the throne and cult rooms of Minoan palaces, to the Minoan snake goddess, to Byzantine icons of the intercessory Virgin, to Romanesque cavelike pilgrimage churches with their converging forests of radiating chapels, to Gothic Chartres with its labyrinth concealing an ancient spring, to medieval and Renaissance manuscripts and paintings alluding to paradise gardens and Mary shrines, to landscape and devotion, to the sensual overlay of Christian iconicity over pagan mobility.

Shrines, chapels, churches, cathedrals, and sacred districts guide me as I reconstruct my assemblages into altars or spiritual topographies. Like the assemblages that I recombine to form their substrate, the altars are meditations and memory capsules. They restructure memories of what I experienced and felt when I visited a certain place, centering those experiences physically, conceptually, and photographically (via documentary images) in a worshipful form. By re-presenting and re-centering this form, whether it be a tree, a cave, a grotto, a garden, a mountain or mountain range, a linear riverscape, a structural combination or all of the above, I hope to release latent energies and, at least temporarily, communicate the peace and exhilaration of what Richard J. Foster calls the interplay of the contemplative and incarnational traditions: "Divine love (which is at the heart of the contemplative life) . . . given visible expression (which is at the heart of the incarnational life)" (40). An artist quoted by Wuthnow hits it exactly: "I see the energy of God as being a part of my energy, the life force" (127).

Making art along the soul journey transforms a place into a sanctuary that one can periodically return to for solace, calming down, rejuvenation, and incredible infusions of energy. This "journal-keeping," Moore writes, makes "a home for certain images that have been transforming." Living artfully, crafting everyday life "arrests attention, an important service to the soul" (*Care of the Soul* 65, 286). According to Peterson, "We need sanctuaries to run to in order to sustain ourselves with what is necessary to live—God and God's provisions for living in a dangerous world that's hostile to faith. Holy places are necessary for holy living" (65). It's crucial to the "journey home," Wuthnow reiterates, that the artist "construct[s]. . . a space in which [her] understanding . . . takes on visible expression, almost like a sacrament" (85).

Stephen Nachmanovitch, a musician and mystic, describes sanctuary as the protected setting or play-space, with "play," or "*lila*," defined as "the taproot from which original art springs; . . . the raw stuff that the artist channels and organizes with all [her] learning and technique. . . . the free spirit of exploration, doing and being for its own pure joy." Sanctuary in this play-space is not so much space as context, not so much bounded field as energy field, not so much studio as experimental laboratory. Here the artist practices her instrument, sharpens her tools, sharpens her skills. In this "delimited sacred space" or *temenos*, "special rules apply [yet] extraordinary events are free to occur (42-43, 75).

Through altarmaking, the artful soul enshrines her journey, creating a home and a *temenos* for the images that have been transformed and transforming. Attended and tended by nature, as well as the Spirit and spirits she has encountered and visualized in her art, this space or sequence of spaces becomes her personal sanctuary. However, the sanctuary is both physical and metaphorical—a physical space for work, prayer, meditation, just being, and further art making; and a metaphorical springboard for communication, exploration, leadership and community building. Its door is always ajar for those times, common to the human condition, when critical functioning breaks down, and the soul re-beckons. Its door is always open for retreat. As one of Wuthnow's interviewees comments, "Things get bad. Things get better. You learn and just when you think you've got it figured out, something slaps you in the face. You're starting from scratch again" (32).

The difference between sanctuary and wilderness is that the latter is unformed, difficult, and barely manageable, while the former is formed, accessible and crafted for tending and manageability. The latter is the storm; the former is the shelter that the artful soul makes to weather the storm. The latter has a trodden, but rough path (the one we hack out); the former has smooth passages, markers, and shrines (the ones we make, then retrace). The latter goes out into the void; the former maps it, grounds it, and names it as place. The latter tracks a rite of passage; the former maps a rite of pilgrimage. Peterson lists "holy mountains, sacred stones, holy women and men, sacred trees, holy words, sacred song, and holy *places*—[as] sanctuaries," and artists as sanctuary keepers (60-61).

When wilderness is understood, it becomes sanctuary, writer Luci Shaw avers. "True wilderness (when there is adequate warmth and water) is essentially a healthy and self-sustaining ecosystem from which we can learn the meaning of health, wholeness, and perhaps even holiness ('set-apart-ness')" (23, 25). This, Moore says, "is the 'goal' of the soul path—to *feel existence*; not to overcome life's struggles and anxieties, but to know life first hand, to exist fully in context" (*Care of the Soul* 260).

Domesticating Threshold; Entering Matrixiality

At this point it must be obvious that I work from a position that is feminine—not only feminine, but domestic. Lesley A. Northup says that "worshiping women allow for the sacredness of mundane spaces" (60). Sanctuary exists in the "chancels" sequestering my domestic ritual: kitchen, dining room meditation corner, porch studio, bedroom/study, basement/studio/study, and library. More recently, sanctuary has resurfaced within the room and office I have occupied as a visiting assistant professor in a large Catholic university 240 miles away from home. Eyeing the wilderness beyond, I have marked these spaces as thresholds. I have erected small "altars" in most of them, using small tables as altar tables, photographs as reliquaries, framed paintings and drawings as altarpieces, and houseplants and previously opened Advent calendars as altar screens. In my rented room—

my threshold away from home—a tiny, low table housing a circlet of candles serves as a site for two-minute (or two-second) devotions and as a miniature Mary shrine for all-too-infrequent readings of the Magnificat. “My soul magnifies the Lord. . . . Be it done to me according to thy Word.”

When I began to think about making shrines, I turned to materials I had readily at hand. These included stones, pebbles and polished minerals, both found and purchased; baskets and tubs of shells, left over from a generous vacation Bible school donation; miscellaneous “art craft” supplies—potpourri mixes, dried flowers, prepared dried branches, tiles, beads, and ribbons; the “supplies” in my pantry—dried lasagna noodles, soup and coffee beans, nuts in their shells, whole nutmeg and cinnamon sticks, sand-colored powdered ginger, white-powdered Cream of Tartar, crystalline white Margarita salt, red Hawaiian salt; and, finally, the supplies in my and my daughter’s jewelry drawers—unworn, discarded, or forgotten earrings, bracelets, rings. I found myself re-making my domestic environment as an offering and intercession.

In her 1977 essay “Making Something from Nothing (Toward a Definition of Women’s ‘Hobby Art’),” Lippard made a pioneering and strong case for “creation outside traditional limits”—creation that goes not for universal truths, but for kernels or details of vernacular experience. “All over the world,” she affirmed, “women privileged and/or desperate and/or daring enough to consider creation outside traditional limits are finding an outlet for these drives in an art. . . . that there is some excuse for making, an art that costs little or nothing and performs and ostensibly useful function in the bargain—the art of making something out of nothing” (102).

Nachmanovitch has reminded us that “there is a French word, *bricolage*, which means making do with the material at hand: a *bricoleur* is a kind of jack-of-all trades or handyman who can fix anything. The *bricoleur* is an artist of limits. . . . we take whatever happened that day, bits and pieces of material and events, and transform them into the deep symbolism of our own personal mythology.” Furthermore, we play. “We toss together elements that were formerly separate. Our actions take on novel sequences. . . . By reinterpreting reality and begetting novelty, we keep from becoming rigid” (86, 43).

Art historian Griselda Pollock, citing artist and psychologist Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger, re-centers Nachmanovitch’s *bricolage* in Lippard’s feminine domain, replacing both writers’ assumptions of haphazardness and implicit marginality with the more provocative, proactive notion of “matrixial borderspace.” Making art in the matrix, Pollock explains, is working outside of the limits and making do. But it is also registering “sensations of co-emergence and partnership in difference.” The matrix is “the process of change in borderlines and thresholds. . . . if it has a centre, [the metamorphic consciousness] constantly slides to the borderline, to the margins. . . . Through this process the limits,

borderlines and thresholds conceived are continually transgressed or dissolved, thus allowing the creation of new ones." This domain, "matrixial possibility," is not to be defined, but discerned. Again the geological metaphor returns; again the threshold reference is revived: "The human subject is not the end product of a narrative development. . . but a discontinuous layering and sedimentation of always active elements that filter through from archaic moments and strata via the unconscious to form a continuous consciousness of 'beside' . . . rather than of 'under.'" (*Differencing the Canon* 212; "Inscriptions in the Feminine" 77).

In June 2000 I wrote in my journal:

"The matrix is a lot of matter, an admixture collected in a sieve or, archaeologically speaking, in a sifting device. You pick through it and prioritize. Fragments may appear, from ancient wholes—vessels used in now-nearly-lost sacred spaces. You clean them carefully, document them, measure them, mount and caption them. Then you construct a narrative or make a piece in which they point to a bigger picture while yet remaining themselves.

"The matrix is contained, embraced, absorbed—then re-fabricated as 'art' so that it can exist as a physical place on the 'map' of sanctuaries, It may well result in multiple pieces and places, but all are mapped on a territory now made commensurable.

In works executed and projects conceived over the past year I have been exploring what it might be to live in and create "matrixialities." The four pieces that form the Mammoth Cave series, completed in late May 2001 have been extremely instrumental in this exploration. With Pollock, Lichtenberg Ettinger, and the cave and its environs in mind, I re-envisioned karst topography—an unstable limestone-capped terrain undermined by sinkholes and sinkhole proclivities—as a wooly matrix with multiple layers overlaying, yet revealing pockets of dangerous and mystical voids. This "spiritual topography" became both a border space and a threshold, a matrix to be continually built up and dissolved, just as sinkholes evidence the processes of natural growth and underground water dissolving limestone.

The altars continue these explorations. They are marks on a map; archaeological remnants; places in flux; places suggesting, yet never fixed on actual cult spaces or landscape; domestic vessels; worlds; matrices. Embodied within them is wilderness, which forms a second matrix beneath and emerges periodically and abruptly as soul, the "sinkholes" of life. The altars are sanctuaries providing places of sanctity and sanity. For me and hopefully for those who visit them, they also provide time and space to think about how the "real" world might be re-sensitized, and to consider how we all might contribute to this process. The altars, then, are not so much installation art but vehicles. They will all be de-installed;

they will, in due time, disintegrate. But in their lifetimes, it is hoped, they will delimit, survey, and sample holy ground.

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